

THE  
CLAIMS OF THE MINISTRY  
ON STRONG MEN

GORDON



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ON STRONG MEN

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# The Claims and Opportunities of the Christian Ministry

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## THE CLAIMS OF THE MINISTRY UPON STRONG MEN

By strong men, I mean persons of intellectual power, who are at the same time persons of high moral ideals and intense moral enthusiasms. By the ministry, I mean the service of a Christian preacher in some one of the various churches of our time. If our men of intellectual power are not at the same time men of high moral ideals and intense moral enthusiasms, the ministry has no claims upon them. It does not want them; they are not fitted to teach religion because they are not experts in it. They are not experts because they are without first-hand, abundant, and joyous knowledge of it. Such persons become, by their intellectual power, a damaging influence upon religion; they lead the public to think that the intellect has little or nothing to do with religion; they stimulate a revolt against reason and a return to fanaticism. It must be repeated, therefore, that our strong man is one whose chief in-

terest in life is moral and spiritual. He is one whose governing aspiration is for excellence of being, high bearing in his relations with men and with God. A young man of intellectual power may be sure of his fitness for the ministry if his whole heart kindles into flame as he reads and ponders these words: "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled."

The first reason why young men of this character should enter the ministry is found in the fact that religion is a fundamental human interest, and should not be allowed to rest in incompetent hands. We know what happens when other great human interests are left in incompetent hands. What would become of the community if the practice of medicine should fall into the hands of quacks? Here we are swift, and yet none too swift, to see the calamity that would follow if this vast interest should be committed to ignorant and perverse men. The same issue of woe is inevitable when economics, art, science, sanitation, government, and philosophy are intrusted to the incompetent. Respecting all human interests, we may use the words of the Hebrew seer: "Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child." That is



always a calamity, and the greater the interest thus outraged, the greater the woe.

Religion is the sovereign interest of man. It is the strongest force in human history, it is the deepest fact in human nature. Modern scholars have brought us face to face with the universality and the momentousness of religion. There are today many great living religions; they attest the religious nature of the race to which we belong. Modern scholars have not only shown us with convincing power the universality and vitality of religion; they have shown us also the tendency of great religions to degenerate. This degeneration has run riot in all the greater religions of the East; it has run riot in Christianity. The most tragic chapter in the history of Europe is that which records the confusion of Christianity with alien and inferior cults, the resolution of the sublime religion of Jesus Christ into a vast compound of the true and the false, of the credible and the incredible. This degeneration has been brought upon the Gospel of Christ because the teachers and preachers of Christ's religion have been, in many cases, unequal to the trust committed to them. This degeneration has been brought upon the Gospel of

Christ chiefly because, in some communions some of the time and in other communions all of the time, teachers and preachers of the Gospel have been conspicuously incompetent. Who can stand in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, and witness the service there, without inexpressible sorrow, without confessing his inability to find in the degraded religion even the marred features of the religion of Jesus? The ministers who conduct that ceremonial are sincere but ignorant, devout but fanatical, loyal to the supreme human interest but infinitely incompetent. If it were music that men thus shamefully treated, or painting, or sculpture, or building, or poetry, or history, or science, the world would break forth in ridicule and scorn. When it is religion, the world suffers in silence over this degeneration and woe.

Preachers are needed who are qualified to teach the ideas of Jesus. His idea of man personal and social, His idea of God in His relation to men and races of men, His vision of eternal life in this temporal world and His conception of the kingdom of Infinite Love, are of supreme concern to our modern world. Is it not worth while to perpetuate this high

teaching? And do we not need men of power for this service?

The work of the preacher is not exhausted in the office of teacher. His great aim in the presentation of ideas is to affect the heart. His chief purpose is to make character after the type of Jesus Christ. The success of this endeavor is essential to the life of civilized man. And only men great in character can render this supremely desirable and supremely difficult service; only they can create character of their own type; only they can fashion the hearts of men after the pattern of Jesus Christ.

The preacher sets himself to continue in the earth the Master's work of mercy. There is the army of the unsuccessful, the host caught and overwhelmed in the tragedy of the world, the multitude left behind and abandoned to their fate by those who ride in the triumphant chariots of progress; and, besides, there is the multitude of those that mourn, whose love is lost and whose hope is dead. Here is a region of life known to few as it is to the Christian minister. Here the sympathies and the wise services of a great nature act like the strong sunshine upon the earth in the grip of winter. Here the wilderness and the

solitary place rejoice, and the desert blossoms as the rose. Here the tradition of Christ's compassion repeats itself, and in so doing renews the immemorial miracle of the upright and loving soul.

To bring in a great fellowship among men and between men and God is the comprehensive aim of the preacher. To use in the interest of this high fellowship the gift of the teacher, the function of the maker of character, the office of the priestly soul, calls for strong men. The best word that I recall from my seminary days is the word of a Methodist preacher: "God and a fool might do as much good in the world as God and a wise man, but they have never done it." They never will do it. If our religion is to be great and to do great things, it must be in the care of great souls—souls great in illumination and in intense and pure desire.

A second reason why young men of power should enter the ministry is found in the fact that strong men have been in this service from the beginning, and that strong men are in it today. The degeneration that I have referred to in history has been often resisted by these strong men, and, when it could not be wholly checked, it has been mitigated by them.

The degeneration that we all fear is now, in a large and hopeful way, held back by men of strength. This apostolic succession in the past pleads for renewal in the finest youth of today. This company of brave, contemporary servants of the supreme interest of society sends forth its appeal for reinforcements.

Strong men have served in this vocation—that proposition is not open to doubt. A Christian preacher first introduced to Europe, to the Gentile world, the distinctive element in our civilization. The greatest man that ever sailed the Mediterranean Sea was not Pericles, nor Alexander, nor Hannibal, nor Cæsar, but Paul. His shadow lies upon Europe as does that of no other man in its history. When Europe began to renew her life in the sixteenth century, it was a Christian preacher who led the way. Our freedom began, not with any scientist, philosopher, man of letters, or man of affairs. It began with Martin Luther. We recall Origen, Athanasius, Augustine, Wyckliffe, Calvin, Knox, Edwards, Channing, Parker, Bushnell, Beecher, Brooks, and through them we recall a host that no man can number who in the vocation of the preacher have wrought

righteousness in the earth, and in the hearts of men have been as the flood-tide of divine regard.

That strong men are in this service today is frequently called in question. Today, it is said, the Church has golden chalices and wooden priests. There is doubtless some ground for this complaint. It originated, I believe, with Savonarola, and we know that it was the truth and no slander upon his lips. It was the habitual complaint of Emerson, although, when in the Harvard Divinity School, Emerson uttered this complaint for the last time, Henry Ward Beecher was preaching in Brooklyn and Phillips Brooks was preaching in Boston. The Church has not always had golden chalices, but from the days of the Apostles she has never been without wooden priests. If I am to judge from my own observation, extending now over many years, I must conclude that on the average there is more sense and reason, more genuine piety and wholesome human feeling, more effective administration and intense devotion among American preachers than at any other period of my existence. The shining names, the great national personalities, may be absent. The preacher is subject to the limitation that always overtakes

the specialist. The increased division of labor has further reduced his importance. The passing of all regard for mere officialism has taken with it a vast rubbish heap that in other days glittered like gold. These things do not count in a fair estimate. The ministry has men in it today of whom any calling might well be proud. In college they proved themselves, in many cases, the equals of their fellows. Their subsequent career has been that of the lover and servant of truth; and to stand among these men in this service is a dishonor to no thinker, to no scholar, to no personality, however great.

I sometimes think that a profession is in the healthiest condition, not when general attention is fixed upon its great names, but when the public is disposed to deny the existence in it of great names. Men do their best work, as a rule, before they become famous. The fame of great men, great universities, and great nations, is not without serious peril. All over this broad land today preachers of the Gospel are studying and thinking and living as ministers in great numbers have done at no time since the Apostolic Age. They have inherited only dis-

credited systems of opinion and vast masses of unwinnowed learning. Under these conditions, they have had to provide for their people the vision of God and life's supreme consolation. They have become, by scores and hundreds, under this discipline, men of originality and depth, of great character and precious influence. It is never just or safe to argue from the absence of fame. The still small voice is the mightiest force in human history. At fitting seasons, and under the provocation of excessive contempt, it may become, as in a Luther or a Knox, a voice like the sound of many waters. Famous Russia was defeated by Japan, a nation largely without fame. Power in the end wins recognition; but, if it be power aside from the kinds usually admired, it may have long to wait. Because it is not recognized, it would be unjust and unsafe to conclude that it does not exist. While men sleep the tide rolls to the flood; while men prate about the absence of power in the ministry today, that power is rising in a mighty silent service. Meanwhile we poor, brainless preachers are strong enough to do our work as in our great Taskmaster's eye, and quick enough to find food for mirth in the haughty manner of our



critics. We know them well; we love them well; and the fear of them in no wise disturbs us.

It may be further said that the satisfactions of the ministry are such as appeal to strong men. Upon this point there is again some doubt. It is believed in certain quarters that preachers live sheltered lives, that they feed upon nothing but indiscriminate and foolish praise. A year or two in this vocation would, I am sure, be sufficient to dissipate this illusion. When in 1875 I went as a home missionary to Temple, Maine, the first compliment I received at the close of my first sermon was from a veteran of the War of 1812, and it ran thus: "Elder, I like to hear you preach. I have had the best sleep today that I have had in a month. Your voice reminds me of my mother's lullaby." Those who think ministers never hear the truth about their work are greatly mistaken. They have yet to discover that piety carries in it, now and then, an immense aptitude for imparting information with a sting in it. Manly men in the ministry get their full share of honest and rough treatment from their fellow-men. I discover no immunity for the preacher here, and, therefore, offer no bribe. Indeed, the memory of

any minister of considerable experience is rich in examples to the contrary, and they are part of the fun of living.

Nor is there any chance for a minister to become rich. In comparison with many other vocations, preachers are poorly paid, and when the preacher's salary is large, as it sometimes is, the human suffering and the great causes of human enlightenment and relief appeal to him with irresistible power, and thus absorb much of his income. Neither dignity in the general regard nor wealth is among the inducements to enter the ministry. There are, however, other inducements that sing in the wholesome human heart.

There is the satisfaction of a noble service, one into which an honest man may put his entire nature. When the day's work is done, the worthy minister may enjoy the reflection of having done much for which he has received no pay—much for which there will never be the least material reward. He may know that he has served his Father in secret because of his love for the service. The chance to do that is the exclusive privilege of no profession; but in the ministry it is, I believe, larger than in any other.

This habit of doing good, with no prospect or thought of material reward, sets free in a man's heart singing voices; and the music they make is not of this world.

Another immense satisfaction of the preacher is the love that he may awaken in others for the highest things. Here we meet the teacher's satisfaction. One cannot think of Socrates walking the streets of Athens with a band of elect youth about him, careless of dress and money and the poor prizes of the world, turning the thought of his generation to the dignity of the intellectual life, without seeing in that great rough face the light of a mighty satisfaction. And in the sphere of the spirit, in the same vocation, we meet Jesus. We see His soul in His eyes as He looks upon those whose love for the Eternal He has kindled. We hear Him say over one poor, wretched life that He had brought back to honor, "I have meat to eat that ye know not of." Such satisfactions all genuine servants of the mind and spirit will always have.

There is still another satisfaction in the minister's life. I mean his unique relation to his kind. He is with his people in the great crises of life. His sympathies enfold the families committed to his care

when children are born, when they are dedicated by their parents in baptism to the Highest, when these children grow up and enter the glorious but perilous world of youth, when they, in turn, build homes of their own; and again in anxiety, in misfortune, in bitter grief, and in death the heart of a worthy minister of Christ is with his people. All this issues in a relation to human beings absolutely unique in this world.

The last satisfaction to which I call attention is that of overcoming difficulties. The ministry is classed economically among the non-productive professions. The clergyman's salary is provided from the savings of others who serve in the productive professions. The stipend is not usually large; it is somewhat uncertain. The minister's tenure of office is also uncertain. Altogether, these facts are apt to chill young men as they look forward to this service. This should not be. These are difficulties to be met and overcome. They may be overcome by the creative spirit of love. Some men have the power to open new industries, to get others to believe in them, and thus to add to the productive power of society. These men are leaders in creative indus-

try. Similar to these men are those preachers who by the power of a great nature create new interest in divine things. Men of this stamp make themselves and their cause essential to the hearts and the happiness of their parishes. They become part of the life of their people, and in consequence their income, while not large, is sufficient and sure. Men of power have made the world: they will continue to make it; and, if the ministry is an unsatisfactory profession today, men of power should enter it, and shape its character by their creative spirit.





